

Grassroots meanings of informality

Resistance, subsistence and survival in the Greek crisis context

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ABSTRACT: Informality poses multiple facets and functions in the modern economic world. In this article I employ a bottom up approach in order to understand what informality is and does according to my informants, understandings and explanations within the greater context of the Greek, economic crisis.

In this article I employ a bottom up approach to understand informality and informal economic activities. I argue that informality provides weapons for the weak (Scott 1985, 1976) to subsist, survive and resist powerful structures and institutions. Specially, I focus on my informants' understandings and explanations of their informal activities, namely the informal production and consumption of goods and services which I analyze within the wider context of the Greek economic crisis. I draw on selected ethnographic observations from Chalkida, Greece, a mid-sized provincial city at the periphery of Athens, where I conducted fieldwork from May 2015 to December 2016¹.

People in Chalkida, as well as in other provincial cities, have direct access to nature and to food production. Almost every household is a petty olive oil producer or has access to olive oil through kinship or social networks. In times of crisis, olive oil production is highly valued, while many, in their effort to supply their income seek to sell their surplus informally. Another resource, to which many in Chalkida have unmediated, market-less access is seafood. Many own amateur fishing licenses and small boats to practice fishing as a hobby. Nowadays, many amateur fishermen manage to make a substantial income out of fishing.

1. Research developed within the ERC Grassroots Economics Project (GRECO).

The agricultural and fishing sector, not only can provide food, but also informal jobs to the unemployed masses. Informal employers claim that they provide employment while, on the contrary, the formal sector fails to do so. Illegal fishing activities have been intensified, while coast guard officials who are responsible to guard and regulate fishing and diving activities are eager to be bribed, especially after the vast reduction of their salaries. Informally produced seafood is not only channeled to households and individuals. Many taverns of Chalkida are supplied with seafood by amateur fishermen and through that way informal goods could be formalized. The same stands true for the agricultural production, such as olive oil, raw vegetables, cheese, wine and meat, while in many cases the tavern owner might be himself or his kin a producer of the above products.

When I asked people who are either producers or consumers of informal goods and services, they mostly used similar patterns of reasoning to justify their informal actions. They mentioned that such practices are necessary to survive, subsist and resist the imposed impoverishment of the masses provoked by the prolonged austerity. Informally produced goods enable people to maintain and reinforce social relationships, in other words to socialize. Goods, such as fish, meat and wine provide an occasion for people to gather and as they said, to be able to have fun. In addition, many have said that cultivating the land or going fishing relieves their stress and makes them feel productive by balancing feelings of self contempt.

In contrast to the big urban centres, such as Athens and Thessaloniki, smaller cities seems to maintain strong relationships with the country side and therefore high levels of, let's say, traditional "informality". During the first years of crisis, the movement without "intermediaries"², which set up informal food markets all over Greece, had gained lots of popularity in big cities such as Athens and Thessaloniki, a method which we could define as urban and contemporary informality. Rakopoulos (2014, 2015) who studied the movement without intermediaries in Thessaloniki, has shown the challenges and the struggles of this social movement to construct and sustain a solidarity network in order to provide a fair price for both the consumer and the producer. This informal social movement required high organizational level since it had to mobilize and coordinate consumers,

2. Their aim was to replace intermediaries who bought cheap agricultural products and then sold dear to the end customer making big profits. By bypassing that chain, they ensured a better and fairer price both for the producer and the consumer, while this practice was endowed with a strong sense of solidarity and resistance against the imposed impoverishment (see Rakopoulos 2015).

volunteers and producers from all over Greece. However, that movement has had little success in smaller cities such as Chalkida, mainly because most of Chalkida's inhabitants had already had access to food production through a less organized network based on kinship and social relationships. That is why hunger has not been a big issue in Chalkida or in any other provincial city in Greece.

Interestingly, when people use the word "survival", they usually refer to social and economic survival rather than to biological survival. Surviving the crisis in my informants' conceptualization, has not had the mere positivistic determination of covering one's basic needs. In small provincial cities, where almost everyone knows everyone, survival, per se, has a symbolic meaning. When people speak about survival, they mean to be able to sustain their life's achievements, be it a house, a business or their social status. It seems that these material assets that people struggle to save have a life of their own.

Yet, the most popular practice of informality, inherent to the formal commercial market, is tax evasion, usually through the sale of goods and services without receipts. Entrepreneurs and consumers justify this practice by making arguments about mutual help, support and personal interest and develop a polemical attitude towards dominant structures and institutions as well as large multinational firms. The ones that buy products or services without receipts usually pay less while those who sell informally are able to hide income and avoid taxation on two levels. Firstly, they avoid attributing the consumption tax which part of it they use to access the market and sustain their businesses, and secondly, they hide income and present lower annual budget so they have less overall taxation.

Here, lies a strong sense of solidarity towards local ventures and people versus faceless, large multinational firms which have been taking advantage of the deregulated market to extract more profits. Preferring to consume in local businesses has multiple benefits for the local society since it enables the local economies to reproduce. Supporting the survival of small local businesses by tolerating and encouraging their tax evading methods is an act of social solidarity, and as an informant has put it, petty informal economic activities maintain the social cohesion. In his view, the worst effect crisis has had in the Greece is that the Greek society had lost its social cohesion.

In many instances, the formal sector is governed by austerity, complexity, irrationality, injustice and corruption makes many to go informal. People speak about the poor services and provisioning the State offers and they complain about the constantly reducing pensions, salaries and benefits and the forever increasing taxation. Money they have paid to the State does not

return to them as taxation has seized to be an egalitarian, redistributive model. Paying fees and taxes is seen as a mode of dispossession, so people resist, however, they have not collectively articulated and expressed a political discourse about the covert and overt acts of their resistance. Unlike more organized informal activities, such as the movement without intermediaries in which people have produced collectively their political discourse about their practices, often is endowed with solidarity and resistance (Rakopoulos 2015).

Very often austerity and dictated authoritative models are considered as death politics, a biopolitical governance (Foucault 1997) at the EU scale which is exercised through economic power and indebtedness. Popular discourses around crisis include words and terminology such as economic colonialization. Many express the view of an ongoing war: «What the Germans did not succeed to get with arms, they do it now through the economic crisis. They are buying us out!» is a very common statement with which the majority of Greeks would agree. We see that resistance takes also the form of a national, an imagined collective resistance; however it is not collectively organized as such. This is a grassroots, non-organized, national and therefore imagined resistance. In that grassroots logic, the Nation has been separated from the State. The State and the government are regarded as puppet mechanisms of foreign capital interests which make structures act on their behalf (Bourdieu 2005). Consequently, resistance takes the form of a political consumerism and an economic nationalism (Lekakis 2015), informality is empowered by the dominant, formal regime which incorporates large scale economic demands of big capital interests and fails to serve the needs of ordinary people, the body of the nation. Combined with the continuous revelations of corruption scandals and upper scale informal practices, petty informal economic activities and petty capital accumulation through informal means are justified further.

Last but not least, informally produced goods provide the means for various food gatherings and festivities which oppose and provide relief to the widespread economic (and social) depression crisis has brought. In that light this is another form of resistance, to have fun and enjoy even in harsh times, while at the same time informality acts as a disalienative force both on the social and the economic sphere. Actually, I have witnessed a counter stereotype being expressed in response to the one that highlights the laziness and unthoughtfulness of the “Southerners” in general, and Greeks in particular, to handle their economics. In several instances, people told me that austerity consists of a cultural trait of the North, hence through my informants’ views,

austerity is not simply an economic project, it is the cultural assimilation of Southern Europe to the strict German standards which opens up a field of cultural resistance as well³.

To conclude with, informality has always been a constitutive part of the Greek society (and economy). A deep socioeconomic structure upon which a certain economic habitus has been constructed. The case of Greece enables to study informality as a widespread social attitude which almost everyone practices it in one way or another. Finally, when ordinary people speak about informality they use the word “black money” or “black market” and non-taxed income or to use a Greek idiom *sti zoula* that means to do in secret. It seems that in the definition of the concept of informality the voices of people, those who engage in informal activities have been ignored and are absent in the formation of the term.

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3. Austerity is a greek word that derives from the adjective *αυστηρός* (*afstiros*) which means strict. In Greek, austerity is translated as *λιτότητα* (*litotita*) which comes from the adjective *λίτος* (*litos*) that means plain, simple, self-abnegating, puritanical etc.